Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem

SESSION 1

Bible Focus: Luke 4:1–13

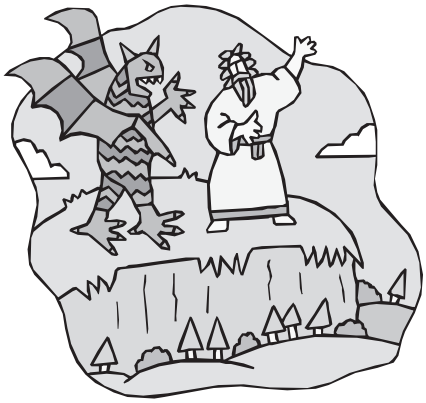
Introduction

The first three Gospels, the so-called Synoptics (from the Greek for "to see together"), each tell the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness just before he begins his active years of ministry. These three Gospels tell us that after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days. Mark tells the tale in a few lean verses. Mathew and Luke add details. John never mentions it.

There are several events in the Bible that are forty days or forty years in duration, most famously Noah's flood and Israel's exodus from Egypt. It may be that "forty" is not be taken literally but was a way to say "a very long time," just as we say a "million" when we want to emphasize the immensity of a number even though we don't mean it literally. Both the desert and the number forty recall Israel's exodus sojourn. But more generally, the desert has always been that place of material privation, free of distraction and austere, where people go to encounter God.

The tempter is named "the devil" by Matthew and Luke. Devil is not a proper name, and the Bible nowhere offers a clear picture of this illusive evil "being." The word *devil* is the English corruption of a Greek word *diabolos*, meaning "the one who throws things around."

Luke lists three specific temptations: to turn desert stones into bread, to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem to be caught by God's angels on the way down, and to be granted "all the kingdoms of the world" if only Jesus would fall down before Satan. In each case, Jesus resists the temptation by quoting a passage of Scripture in response. The devil responds at one point by quoting Scripture back at Jesus, the source of the quip that "even the devil can quote Scripture."



The three temptations are both illusive and illustrative. Bread would have obviously satisfied Jesus' hunger, but such a trick might have also enabled him to win the loyalty of the masses with free bread much in the way Rome kept the restless population of its capital at ease with free bread every day. Jumping from the conspicuous "pinnacle" of the Temple only to be caught by angels would have certainly wowed the crowds. The third offer of "all the kingdoms of the world" would have granted Jesus the earthly, even violent, power that could *demand* faith by edict or threat of sword. But Jesus is persistently clear, here and throughout his ministry, that this is not the kind of faith he seeks. Alone among the three Gospels that tell the story of the temptation, Luke ends his telling with the foreboding words of verse 13, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

Serious Temptation

There are, as noted, several themes hidden in the story of Jesus' temptation. There's a theme about the temptation of materialism represented appropriately by "bread"—bread made from desert stones. There's the theme of power and what power can do to people. Power is represented by the "kingdoms of the world" that the devil offers to Jesus. There's the theme of the manipulation of faith by outward miracle. In this story, the devil tempts Jesus to offer a "miracle show" in Jerusalem. He could leap from the top of the Temple to be caught by angels and win over the city by a magic act. But it's the enigmatic last words of Luke's story that really fascinate me. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him. . . ." And then those last four words: "until an opportune time." That "opportune time" doesn't come for eighteen chapters. For eighteen chapters, *diabolos* seems to go underground; the devil bides his time until the moment comes and only then presents Jesus with one last temptation.

Nearly twenty years ago, a Jesus movie caused a cultural stir every bit as upsetting as Mel Gibson's more recent *The Passion of the Christ* (albeit for very different reasons). This earlier film suggested the temptation that comes to Jesus at Luke's "opportune time." This controversy swirled around Martin Scorsese's filmed version of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ.* Both the novelist and the filmmaker fictionalized the story as told in the Gospels with creatively reckless abandon. But for all the fantasy, the "last temptation" they speculate about is fundamentally congruous—though altogether speculative—with the biblical "last temptation" that comes at the "opportune time."

It comes in chapter 22 of Luke, the final night of Jesus' life, just after the Last Supper. Jesus has gone to a garden on the Mount of Olives to pray with several of his disciples. Twice he tells the disciples to pray that they may not "come into the time of trial." And then, alone, Jesus prays his way through his "last temptation." He prays that God might "remove this cup from me." The "cup" stands for the cross, of course. Jesus' last temptation is, quite simply, to avoid the cross. He is tempted to take an easier route that skirts the horror to come. Jesus' last temptation is to a take a road that would bypass the very act of sacrificial love that somehow saves us.

Both the Kazantzakis novel and the Scorsese film present this final temptation in the form of a dream. Instead of the cross before him, Jesus dreams of living a long and "successful" life. The dream includes marriage to Mary Magdalene replete with passion, children, and the good life in the green hills of Galilee. Had Jesus yielded to this last temptation, had he passed by the cross, he might have become a great carpenter. He might have become a successful teacher. He might still have been an inspiration, even a venerated sage, but he would not have been the Savior.

Actually, the three temptations in the desert and this fourth temptation in the garden are variations on one theme. Each of them is a temptation to be a "success" but in the process to forget whom he was meant to be. In the desert, *diabolos* tempts him with the power that would come with an endless supply of bread. He tempts him with the "kingdoms of the world," power implicit in political position. He tempts him with the "success" that would doubtless follow a flying act off the top of the Temple. And finally, according to Kazantzakis and Scorsese, when none of that worked, *diabolos* tempts him in the garden—"at an opportune time"—with a simpler and subtler kind of success: "Forget the cross, be a good rabbi back in Nazareth, get married, settle down, and become modestly famous for a while."

More than Peccadilloes

When we think about temptation (something we are supposed to do in Lent), we usually focus in on our peccadilloes, our "little sins." Our consciences dutifully offer up memories of questionable tax deductions, edgy deals, and awkward passions. We remember convenient lies and unkind words. All these are real, of course, and we do well to resist them and repent of them. But in the end, they're not our most serious temptation, any more than they were Jesus' real temptation.

We live in a world in which our sharpest temptation is often much the same as the sum of the four Jesus faced. Just as he was tempted to forget who he was and be a success, we are tempted to be a success in the eyes of the world but in the process to forget whom we are called to be. Don't misunderstand me; success can be a very good thing. Indeed, sometimes being whom you are called to be may well lead to success in the eyes of the world. But the harder truth is this: "success" in the

eyes of the world and "whom you are meant to be" are not always the same thing. In fact, sometimes they are at sharp odds with each other.

The real temptation Jesus faced, the real temptation we face in a hundred subtle ways, is the temptation to be a success in the eyes of the world but at the cost of integrity. We are tempted to succeed at the price of our families, to succeed magnificently but to lose our happiness, to succeed grandly and pay for it with our souls. Had Jesus given in to *diabolos*, either in the desert or in the garden, he might have been a smashing first-century success—plenty of bread, famous worker of miracles, major Judean politician, or maybe just a locally renowned rabbi-carpenter, husband, and father. All of these are credible manifestations of success, but Jesus was meant to be more. And you and I are finally meant for even more than success in the eyes of the world.

Resisting Diabolos

I don't know precisely what I believe about the devil, but I do know that there is some malign and centrifugal force rumbling about life, a *diabolos* forever throwing everything all over the place. The one who throws things all over the place wants to confuse me about what really matters, wants to confuse me about whom I am really called to be, and wants to entice me down paths that seem alluring at the moment but do not lead to the life I am called to live.

Jesus resisted "the one who throws things around," of course. Just *how* he resists is of crucial importance. Three times in the desert he resists, and each time he arms himself with Scripture, with tradition, with memory, against the fresh ideas of you-know-whom. Three times he remembers sacred words that he knows like the back of his hand. And three times he is strengthened by remembering. Jesus resisted temptation by reaching deep into the tradition, the long heritage of faith that teaches us what matters most. "'"One does not live by bread alone,"'" he remembered. "'"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,"'" he recalled.

When we are tempted and need to remember whom we are meant to be, when we are tempted with easy and beguiling success, when we need to remember what really matters, we too need to reach into the tradition as Jesus did and remember—remember who we are.

Tom Long teaches preaching at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and is one of the finest preachers and storytellers I know. He once told me a tale about a high school play he'd been a part of, a story about being tempted with success, but forgetting whom you are meant to be. This play was being directed by a teacher new to Tom's high school, a young woman fresh out of teachers' college, full of energy and enthusiasm. She hoped to direct the best high school play there ever was. She worked with the kids week after week, fitting costumes, blocking the movements of stage, and, of course, helping the students memorize lines. Her zeal was contagious, and by the time opening night rolled around, the whole cast believed in themselves. That night was electric; the school auditorium packed full and charged with anticipation.

All went well at first—until the middle of the second act. Then, one of the lead players forgot a line. It was painfully obvious; the auditorium fell silent. Sitting at the foot of the stage, the young teacher/director whispered the forgotten words to the student, but he either didn't hear or didn't pay attention. The silence from the stage grew ever more awkward. In desperation, unable to remember his words, the kid ad-libbed a line. He just made something up.

The audience was relieved, the line was clever enough, and it got a laugh, a good laugh the kid enjoyed. So he made up another line. There was laughter again, but less laughter this time. After delivering his third fabricated line, there was nothing in the auditorium but silence and embarrassment. Tom remembers looking down at the foot of the stage to where the young teacher was sitting, watching her play. He said he saw tears streaming down her cheeks.

The one who throws everything all over the place is forever tempting us to make up our own lines, make them up for success with the crowd. All we can do in order to resist such temptation is reach into the tradition and remember who we are, remember our lines as it were.

Lines like: "One does not live by bread alone." "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." "Do justice and . . . love kindness, and . . . walk humbly with your God." "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." "Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil." "Strive first for the kingdom of God." "Love one another."

"You shall not steal." "Hold fast to what is good." "Help the suffering, honor all people."

Our Identity

Diabolos didn't tempt Jesus with Cuban cigars or single-malt Scotch. It wasn't geisha girls or shady deals. "The one who throws things around" tempted him to forget his identity. And when all is said and done, that's eternally our most serious temptation as well.

When we wear the name "Christian," we do no less than assume our core identity. To be a Christian is not one loyalty among many. To be a Christian is not one of several equally important identities. Faith cannot be just one personal interest among several hobbies. Church is not just another of the various associations you might belong to. The teachings of Jesus are not just one possible source of guidance among many we might select, cafeteria style. At the end of the day, you just can't dabble with Jesus. You might be a mom or a music teacher who is a Christian. You might be a Christian investment banker. You can be a follower of Jesus Christ who is also a lawyer. In these dual roles, however, it is your faith that guides your music teaching, your mothering, and your banking, not the other way around.

This is not exactly how the world sees it, of course. Let me offer a simple illustration. You are at a party, milling around in the hubbub, and you meet somebody new. Three or four sentences into the conversation, you ask the big question that always hangs in the air at such events: "What do you do?" Innocently enough, I've asked it a zillion times. But often "What do you do?" really means "Who are you?" It doesn't just mean "What is your job?" It means "What is your identity?"

To confess Christian faith means that you have been given your central identity. Who you are is defined by the ethics of Jesus. Who you are is defined by the compassion of Jesus. Who you are is defined by the death and life again of Jesus. Of course, the world generally insists that you are defined by what you do for a living, or where you went to school, or your address.

Our core human temptation is the same as the sum of the ones Jesus faced in the wilderness and on the night before his death. The eternal temptation is always to forget who you are and let the world define you, to forget who you are and let your job define you, to forget who you are and let money define you, to forget who you are and let clothes, or smarts, or looks, or addiction, or sex define you.

Over the years, whenever one of our children has gone out the door, whether for an evening or off to college, I have always whispered the same words in his or her ear during the farewell hug. I've been saying these words for so long that they've become a standing family joke. I said them when our oldest moved to New York after college graduation. I said them to my son when he got on the plane to go on a mission trip to Israel. I said them to our youngest when she flew off for her freshman year. I give them the farewell hug and say to them, "Remember who you are."

About the Writer

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